

# Giving up the Struggle for Life: J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*

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**Abstract:** This article discusses two novels by J.M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*, with reference to the Darwinian concept of the struggle for life. The novels depict a world riven by conflict, struggle and competition for resources, which is partly ascribable to the socio-political context of South Africa. In both stories the protagonists are confronted with extreme situations, both facing moments when their survival comes under threat. In the light of Darwinian concepts, Coetzee's characters fail to adapt to the changing environment and ultimately face extinction. Despite the very significant differences between Michael K and David Lurie – including the degree of their self-understanding – they both undergo harrowing experiences, as a result of which they descend to the level of animal existence, retreating to, as Lurie's daughter puts it, "the only life there is. Which we share with animals." The implications of the protagonists' affinity with animals are discussed with regard to Darwin's claims about the continuities between human and animal life. This article examines the protagonists' actions and decisions with relation to the biological imperative to struggle for life.

**Keywords:** J.M. Coetzee; Charles Darwin; struggle for existence; Darwinism in literature

Both *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace* portray a world riven by conflict and struggle. Both, too, contain overt indications of their setting. The place names mentioned in these stories unmistakably denote the place as South Africa, but there are suggestions that the temporal setting is meaningful as well. Although *Life and Times of Michael K* is quite reticent on the details of the war it depicts, commentators generally regard it as a representation of the racial conflict in

South Africa before the abolition of apartheid. Harold Fromm, for example, characterises the novel's hero as "an idiot savant [wandering] around South Africa during an imagined time of what amounts to civil war between the minority whites and the majority blacks" (Fromm 2000: 338). The protagonist is inclined to see the nature of his existence in relation to his times: "What a pity that to live in times like these a man must be ready to live like a beast" (Coetzee 2004: 99). In *Disgrace*, Lucy, challenged by her father as to why she will not report details of her rape to the police, invokes the particulars of the setting – "this place, at this time," "this place being South Africa" (Coetzee 2000: 112) – as if this was a sufficient explanation.<sup>1</sup> The South African critic Jacques Van Der Elst in his analysis of *Disgrace* emphasises the significance of the historical circumstances, claiming that

*Disgrace* reflects the life of certain South Africans during the first period of transition from apartheid South Africa to a new Democratic State, celebrating its first 10 years of existence in April 2004. In fact the characters become symbols, perhaps allegorical of present-day white and black South Africans. (Elst 2006: 39)

According to Derek Attridge, the singularity of the characters' situation in *Disgrace* inheres in the "re-negotiation of relations between communities and individuals" (Attridge 2000: 104-105).<sup>2</sup> Their future depends on how well they can adapt to their changed environment.

At the beginning of their stories the protagonists of *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace* could not have been more different: the former a misshapen, uneducated, inarticulate labourer, the latter a successful, self-confident university professor. If the novels are to be treated as representations of "this place, at this time," then K belongs to the oppressed majority while Lurie to the formerly privileged minority which is currently losing its status. Yet ultimately they both, in their different ways, descend to a similarly low level. Having shed all they had, they live – as K puts it – "like a beast," or – as Lurie's daughter says – "the only life there is. Which we share with animals" (Coetzee 2000: 74). This paper will explore the Darwinian implications of the characters' affinity with animal life and argue that their ultimate failure to adapt to their changed circumstances may be interpreted as defeat in what Darwin named "the battle for life."

<sup>1</sup> The strong reactions that *Disgrace* provoked in South Africa, e.g. the hostile criticism from the African National Congress (cf. Roy 2012: 700), testify to the pertinence of Coetzee's representation of "this time" and "this place."

<sup>2</sup> Michael S. Kochin (2004: 6) is more explicit about the nature of the changes. While commenting on Lucy's final submission to her black neighbour Petrus, he points to "[t]he new inverted order, in which blacks act as colonial exploiters of their former white overlords."

Inspired by his reading of Thomas Malthus, Darwin bequeathed to modernity the concept of life as a constant struggle. In his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) Malthus argued that the rate of human population growth exceeds resources of nutrition and space; hence those occupying the same environments must compete with one another and this competition controls the increase of population. Malthus's observations made Darwin realise the opposition between the forces of reproduction and destruction, and the fact that an enormous proportion of living beings are systematically destroyed. Darwin concluded that Malthusian calculations applied across the entire world of nature; he seized on Malthus's idea of competition and generalised it to other species. Darwin, who was developing his theory of the changeability of all nature, understood that "the key was whatever made a difference between those that survive to reproduce and those that do not" (Wyhe 2012: 18). In his view, the struggle for life is an inevitable result of the great rate at which all organic beings tend to increase their number and the limited accessibility of resources, which puts species and individuals in competition with one another. By Darwin's own admission, Malthus's insights provided him with "the missing link" in his thinking about evolution (cf. Reznick 2011: 68). Darwin was convinced of the fundamental significance of natural selection as the key mechanism of evolutionary change. Drawing on the enormous body of evidence he had amassed, the scientist assumed that all species had come into being by a process of gradual differentiation and selection under environmental pressures. The Darwinian history of the world involved "[s]urvival and descent, extinction and forgetfulness, being briefly alive and struggling to stay so, living in an environment composed of multiple other needs, coupling and continuing, ceasing to be" (Beer 2008: ix).

Darwin's seminal work *On the Origin of Species* analyses the process of evolutionary change. However, despite the implications of the title, Darwin does not speculate about the origins of life, nor is his theory teleological, apart from the author's vague hints at the potential for enhancement and perfectibility inherent in the evolution of species. The theory has generated a variety of ideological interpretations; even Darwin himself moved between different "moods of interpretation" (Beer 2008: xx) and experienced difficulty in extending his conclusions beyond strictly scientific data. His primary problem (which still gives rise to conflicting readings) was the question of agency, as is reflected in his occasionally ambiguous references to nature. The cultural paradigm within which he worked was permeated with the concept of design, and Darwin found it difficult to renounce (Beer 2008: xxi-xxiii). As Gillian Beer notes, the tension within his theory resulted also from the interplay of three ideas: hyperproductivity, variability and selection. Whereas the first two "tend towards largesse," the third

is “more frugal” – “[i]t drives ruthlessly across the populous ideal landscape of the first two, culling, controlling, weeding out” (Beer 2008: xviii).

Natural selection involves unavoidable conflict. In order to describe its workings, Darwin consistently uses phrases such as “the great battle of life” or “the war of nature;” his synthetic theory of evolution includes death and destruction as its inseparable parts. Although Darwin also emphasises symbiotic relationships and the interdependence of various forms of life, his vision is “fundamentally one of competitive struggle” (Carroll 2011: 205). While he appreciates the role of the physical environment (climate change, etc.) as a source of natural selection, he nevertheless stresses the diverse “competitive and exploitative interactions” between living organisms as the major cause of change (Reznik 2011: 67). So construed, the world appears amoral: natural selection is “simply a sorting process that favours those individuals most apt to a particular contemporary environment” (Beer 2008: xix). However, aware of the bleakness of the altered image of the world that he and other nineteenth-century scientists had put forward, Darwin tried to inscribe his theory within a larger framework of universal progress. In the conclusion to the chapter on “Struggle for Existence” (*The Origin of Species*) Darwin claims that “[w]hen we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply” (Darwin 1859: 79).

From the point of view of the individual, however, the prospect of the long-term perfectibility of better fitted species is hardly a consolation. Beer aptly remarks that even the formulation “we may console ourselves with the full belief” challenges its own apparent certainty because it is obvious that Darwin regards extinction as inevitable in evolutionary change (Beer 2008: xxv). Since the inception of Darwin’s theory literature has tended to explore its sinister and disconcerting implications. Coetzee’s protagonists Michael K and David Lurie are not among the vigorous, the healthy and the happy who are given a chance to survive and multiply. The medical officer at the camp where K is incarcerated describes him as “a poor helpless soul who has been permitted to wander out on to the battlefield, if I may use that word, the battlefield of life, when he should have been shut away in an institution with high walls, stuffing cushions or watering the flower-beds” (Coetzee 2004: 141). If from the evolutionary perspective the Darwinian battle for life is so prolonged that its effects may not be immediately felt by the individual, the historical circumstances in which K lives radically precipitate the process. Although uninvolved with any of the warring parties, “largely oblivious of or uncaring about what is going on except insofar as it impinges on his individual consciousness as a sentient being” (Fromm 2000:

338), K is unwittingly caught up in a ruthless bloody conflict, which in his limited world amounts to a universal all-encompassing fight, where individual and group extinction appears imminent.

As defined by Darwin, natural selection has shaped two kinds of “motives and emotions”: “those directed toward survival (obtaining food and shelter, avoiding predators) and those directed toward reproduction” (Carroll 2011: 14). K’s efforts are concentrated solely on survival, but even this poses an enormous challenge. Darwin mentions scarcity of space and food as two of the environmental factors that put a check on a species’ tendency to multiply. Although obviously lacking this knowledge, K has an intuition that amidst the general mayhem his only chance of survival is to find a place and a means of sustenance for himself, outside the battlefield. A recurring pattern in his experience, however, is the loss of his private living space. K learns that there is no free space anymore, that all the land is being contested. When he arrives at the abandoned Visagie farm, his safe haven is soon invaded by the returning grandson of the family, himself looking for a hiding place. The young man reappropriates the house and makes K share his food with him. Even if he cannot verbalise his discovery, K has a correct realisation of his inability to keep out of the fight: “K sat on his heels poking the fire, barely listening, thinking: I let myself believe that this was one of those islands without an owner. Now I am learning the truth. Now I am learning my lesson” (Coetzee 2004: 61).

A similar discovery, although much more eloquently articulated, is made by Lurie in *Disgrace*. Once he has left the safe niche of academic life in Cape Town and gone to stay with his daughter, the concept of the struggle for life, in which weaker or superfluous individuals and species are subject to annihilation, recurs again and again in his reflections and in his conversations with others. This notion is applied in various contexts, ranging from the killing of unwanted dogs, the relations between the whites and the blacks in South Africa, to the protagonist’s own situation. Unwanted animals have to die because there are more pressing needs on the nation’s list of priorities, hence the Animal Welfare People fight what Lurie describes as “a losing battle” (Coetzee 2000: 73). The animal shelter is not big enough for all so some have to be regularly eliminated to make way for the new arrivals. This ensures that the number of animals stays the same. Probably having no idea that she echoes Malthus, Bev Shaw asserts, “The trouble is, there are just too many of them [...]. They don’t understand it, of course, and we have no way of telling them. Too many by our standards, not by theirs. They would just multiply and multiply if they had their way, until they filled the earth” (Coetzee 2000: 85). Lurie is reminded of the note left by Father Time in Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*: “because we are too menny” (Coetzee 2000:

146). Although initially quite indifferent to what Bev does, Lurie is intrigued by the obvious discrepancy between her genuine concern for animals on the one hand, and, on the other hand, her complicity in the elimination of unwanted beings. Soon, however, what seemed a mildly interesting philosophical dilemma acquires a personal urgency for him.

His immediate conscious reaction to the shock of the attack on himself and his daughter is to distance himself mentally and regard the event impersonally as an inevitable part of the competition for resources:

A risk to own anything: a car, a pair of shoes, a packet of cigarettes. Not enough to go round, not enough cars, shoes, cigarettes. Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. That is the theory; hold on to the theory and to the comforts of theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. This is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad. Cars, shoes; women too. (Coetzee 2000: 98)

However, such a dissociation of sensibility is impossible when the experience is so personal. The attack compels the protagonist to redefine himself in his own eyes as one of the inevitable losers in the universal struggle. The harm he has suffered is imagined as material ("He has a sense that, inside him, a vital organ has been bruised, abused – perhaps even his heart" [Coetzee 2000: 107]), but Lurie's physical sensation that his life is bleeding away is primarily an embodiment of his loss of the will to live. He is brought up short to face ageing and mortality, and the process of his growing indifference to the world sets in.

The prospect of biological extinction is inextricably linked to the indelible damage done to his daughter's body. His failure to save her from rape and his subsequent failure to persuade her to have an abortion and escape from the country signifies, in biological terms, the protagonist's ultimate demise. However we interpret Lucy's decision to have the child, Lurie is unlikely to accept it as a continuation of his own being. Lurie thinks of Lucy's offspring in terms of the erasure rather than the continuity of his identity: "... from within her will have issued another existence, that with luck will be just as solid, just as long-lasting. So it will go on, a line of existences in which his share, his gift, will grow inexorably less and less till it may as well be forgotten" (Coetzee 2000: 217).

He conceives of the child as an alien creature, forced upon his daughter's body, and from the start appropriated by a hostile, dominant species. It is generally recognised by the white community that the attacks on white farmers are more than robbery; they are seen as acts of retribution, or, in Darwinian terms, part of the bitter struggle for existence, in which one race will subdue and eventually

eliminate the other. Lucy's neighbour, old Ettlinger, has no son to whom he could bequeath his farm, and Lucy is quite certain that despite the defences he has installed around his household he will soon be found with a bullet in his head.<sup>3</sup> In the South African context, the loss of a farm is more than material dispossession; as H.P. van Coller contends in his discussion of the Afrikaans *plaasroman*, the farm is "a mythical location," tying the Afrikaner to the earth, to his people and to his history. The farm is both a bastion in which he defends himself against adversaries and his legacy to be passed on to future generations (Coller 2006: 21-22). In post-apartheid South Africa "[t]he farm space is a violently contested boundary" (Graham 2003: 438) since the racial and political conflict often takes the form of rivalry for land. Van Coller points out that in *Disgrace* "the role-players in the hierarchy exchange places: Petrus advances in stages from labourer, bywoner, neighbour, to finally, in effect, the owner. Through him are presented the changing post-colonial social relationships in which the former masters become stripped of all their potency" (Coller 2006: 23).

While Lucy admits that the attackers' primary motive was an expression of racial hatred through rape,<sup>4</sup> Lurie interprets the violation of white women in a wider context as the most vicious form of the struggle for life: "They were not raping, they were mating. It was not the pleasure principle that ran the show but the testicles, sacs bulging with seed aching to perfect itself" (Coetzee 2000: 199). The misuse of Lucy's body by the black rapists and the looming appropriation of her land by her black neighbour are, from Lurie's point of view, part of the same process, and he has reason to think that the rape was also instigated or at least condoned by Petrus.<sup>5</sup> Although Lucy will be the mother of the child and will retain her farm, the protagonist perceives her as a passive victim of racial rivalry and sees the recent developments as signs of the demise of the weaker race. In an inverse parallel to the emerging supremacy of the black community, the English language is becoming extinct in South Africa, "[l]ike a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud" (Coetzee 2000: 117). A further metaphor of merging with the earth is invoked to envision the termination of his individual identity: "A father without the sense to have a son: is this how it is all going to end, is this how his line is going to run out, like water dribbling into the earth?" (Coetzee 2000: 199).

<sup>3</sup> Gareth Cornwell emphasises the historical connotations of the location of Lucy's farm: it is situated in the "Frontier Country," and the valley of Salem was the site of nine Frontier Wars fought between the British and the Xhosa people in the nineteenth century (Cornwell 2003: 43-47).

<sup>4</sup> Sexuality and race are intricately intertwined in the South African context. The policy of apartheid involved taboos against miscegenation, and the changing power relations have altered but by no means eliminated the link between race, sex and politics (cf. Roy 2012: 703-705).

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Valerie Graham argues that "Coetzee's choice of the rural Eastern Cape as a setting for the rape of Lurie's daughter by three black men emphasises complex historical relationships between issues of race, gender and land" (Graham 2003: 438).



Eschatological visions permeate Lurie's thinking from the moment of the attack. His repeated attempts to persuade his daughter to start another life elsewhere seem to be his last gesture of resistance. Once it fails, Lurie's life becomes strongly end-oriented. The conversation he has with his daughter is an apt description of both her, and indeed his own situation:

'How humiliating,' he says finally. 'Such high hopes, and to end like this.'

'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.'

'Like a dog.'

'Yes, like a dog.' (Coetzee 2000: 205)

Although father and daughter seem to agree, their evocation of a dog's life does not have the same meaning for both of them. Lucy talks about the descent to an animal level as her starting point while for Lurie it connotes the end – having become a dog-man, he has no intention and no hope of moving beyond that stage. From his point of view, his plunge is final and absolute, admitting of no improvement. It has been remarked (Ciobanu 2012: 686) that this particular comparison is made in Kafka's *Trial* to describe the manner of K's death. Given Lurie's propensity to relate his experience to literature, this line may be read as a deliberate allusion on his part. Despite the protagonist's growing fellow-feeling for animals and the recurrent parallels between human and animal life in the novel, there is no evidence that Lurie – in contrast to Coetzee's other protagonist Elizabeth Costello – wants to "extend the range of personhood (in varying degrees) to include animals" (cf. Fromm 2000: 340).<sup>6</sup>

A gap opens up between father and daughter as she chooses to join the winning side. Lurie feels alienated from her, and superfluous in her household: "The problem is with the people she lives among. When I am added in, we become too many. Too many in too small a space. Like spiders in a bottle" (Coetzee 2000: 209).

While Lurie cannot comprehend his daughter's choices, he cannot successfully rationalise his own actions either. Apart from assisting in the euthanasia of unwanted dogs, he undertakes the patently redundant task of ensuring that their remains are disposed of with dignity. Deidra Coleman interprets the protagonist's conduct at the end of the story as a result of his transition from one version of Darwinism to another. Initially, she argues, Lurie envisions existence as a struggle and a competition in racial, sexual and generational terms, whereas his

<sup>6</sup> It should be remembered that in Coetzee's earlier fiction, notably *Waiting for the Barbarians*, animal analogies are used to chart the process of dehumanisation (cf. Randall 2007: 213-214).



extraordinary commitment to animals signifies his recognition of the continuity of life across the species barrier (Coleman 2009: 598). In his later work *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) Darwin presented the results of his comparative studies, arguing that the affinities between the behaviour and emotions of human beings and higher animals are further proof of man's descent from animals. Darwin believed that ethics had evolutionary origins and hence the instinct of sympathy was a sign of a more advanced phase of development. He further claimed that a perfecting of the human social order involved a transcendence of an egoistic drive to individual survival and reproduction and its concomitant replacement by an extension of sympathy towards other human beings and, eventually, all living things.<sup>7</sup> In line with Darwin's emphasis on the link between interspecies sympathy and ethics, Coleman (2009: 604) suggests that Lurie sheds his egoistic stance in favour of a revaluation of alterity. Indeed, most critics read Lurie's sympathy with dogs as his ethical improvement; some even detect in it a glimmer of hope for post-apartheid South African society. Calina Ciobanu, following Gayatri Spivak, posits that the idea of living like a dog, "rooted in the novel's interspecies ethical imaginary," holds the prospect of the levelling of racial hierarchies since the simile stresses sameness rather than exclusion and difference (Ciobanu 2012: 686-687).

Yet it should be noted that in the South African context the protagonist's descent to the level of dogs may not be so much a levelling of hierarchies as a reversal of the existing ones. Lucy's employee Petrus, soon to be master of her land and body, resents his work with her dogs, seeing it as a form of humiliation. As Jacques Van Der Elst points out (after J.U. Jacobs), the slogan "Whites are dogs" was the abusive chant sung by the militant black youth (Elst 2006: 42-43).<sup>8</sup> In the political and cultural context of the story, Lurie's acceptance of this status may represent the changing of places between the dominant and the subdued species. Rosemary Nagy describes Petrus as "the mirror image of ordinary white South Africans under apartheid" (2004: 711), commenting that "[t]he reversal is stark: Petrus is no longer the 'dog-boy', whereas Lucy goes down 'like a dog'" (2004: 714). By possibly staging the attack, Lucy's neighbour "asserts his permanence in the land against [her] transience" (Kochin 2004: 6). In his analysis of the novel Derek Attridge (2000: 100) emphasises its historico-political context and describes *Disgrace* as "a novel dealing with relations between racially-defined groups set in

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Carroll (2011: 225) calls this vision utopian, and a proof to what extent Darwin was "bound within the ideological constraints of his age."

<sup>8</sup> Dogs have been burdened with connotations of the racial and political struggle in South Africa. Ranjana Khanna recounts a 1998 incident in which the police set dogs on three black men (cf. Ciobanu 2012: 679). Katherine Herbert has pointed out that the kind of dogs Lucy keeps used to be trained to attack blacks (cf. Attridge 2000: 107).

immediately post-apartheid South Africa," whereas Gareth Cornwell (2003: 43) reads *Disgrace* more specifically as "a story concerned at its core with entitlement to the land in post-apartheid South Africa."<sup>9</sup>

The Darwinian allusions in the novel imply the inevitability of divisions and segregation. Lurie finds himself in yet another condemned category: the aged. Recalling Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" (Coetzee 2000: 190), Lurie bitterly acknowledges his exclusion from the country of sensual delights, which he must leave to the younger generation. Whereas he refrains from denouncing his affair with one of his students on moral grounds, he now recognises its unnaturalness ("broadcasting old seed, tired seed, seed that does not quicken, *contra naturam*" [Coetzee 2000: 190]). Warned by Melanie's boyfriend to "[s]tay with [his] own kind," and, despite trying to quibble ("who is this boy to tell him who his kind are" [Coetzee 2000: 194]), he tacitly acknowledges that it is time to renounce the "rights of desire" on which his relationships with women depended.

There is a peculiar symmetry between the protagonist's declining social status and self-centredness and the increase in his understanding of and commitment to other people and animals. In the light of Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions* it is easy to argue that the protagonist's sympathy with another species signifies his evolutionary advancement. Yet Darwin could not convincingly prove that ethics is a straightforward consequence of evolution. Indeed Darwin's contemporary T.H. Huxley in *Evolution and Ethics* took issue with him on this point, arguing that in human society the struggle for existence is incompatible with ethical behaviour:

I have termed this evolution of the feelings out of which the primitive bonds of human society are so largely forged, into the organized and personified sympathy we call conscience, the ethical process. So far as it tends to make any human society more efficient in the struggle for existence with the state of nature, or with other societies, it works in harmonious contrast with the cosmic process. But it is none the less true that, since law and morals are restraints upon the struggle for existence between men in society, the ethical process is in opposition to the principle of the cosmic process, and tends to the suppression of the qualities best fitted for success in that struggle. (Huxley 1896: 30-31)

Emmanuel Levinas refused to endorse the concept of animal ethics, claiming that albeit ethical behaviour should be extended to all living beings, the basis for this is human ethics: "A being is something that is attached to its own being. That is Darwin's idea. The being of animals is a struggle for life. A struggle for life without ethics" (qtd. in Ciobanu 2012: 675-676).

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Van Der Elst (2006: 53) is inclined to interpret the novel as an expression of quite a bleak view of the future of South African society.

Arguably, it is more appropriate to see Lurie's descent to the level of dog-man as, paradoxically, an assertion of his humanity rather than his animality. Although in the course of the narrative his sympathetic imagination extends to animals, he always retains his human perspective. The quasi-funeral rites he performs for the dead dogs are, from an evolutionary perspective, a completely superfluous gesture of charity towards extinct creatures. Lurie's attention to animal corpses cannot be rationally justified except as a need to uphold his own principles:

Why has he taken on this job? To lighten the burden on Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway?

For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing. (Coetzee 2000: 145-146)

In spite of all the obscurity regarding his motivation, it is clear, as Derek Attridge points out, that Lurie does not become an upholder of animal rights; neither can his ministrations to the dead dogs be attributed to "the emotional pull experienced by the animal lover" (Attridge 2000: 108). The fact that Lurie treats his attitude as an idiosyncratic stance makes these principles appear old-fashioned and doomed to extinction, like the protagonist himself.<sup>10</sup> His assistance in the euthanasia of the dogs at first looks like acquiescence in nature's ruthlessness, but it must be noted that Lurie is in fact on the side of the dogs. If they are superfluous, then so is the protagonist, as he himself indicates on several occasions. By being charitable, he acts against rather than in complicity with evolutionary logic. Attridge claims that, far from adopting a biocentric perspective, the protagonist applies – or misapplies – terms of human culture to dead animals. Lurie asserts the singularity of each creature rather than allowing the dead dogs to be reduced to "mere accumulations of matter" (Attridge 2000: 115-116).

His poignant decision in the concluding episode of the book to give up his favourite dog must be interpreted in relation to his previous acts of failure or resignation. Lurie knows that the dog cannot be saved from death anyway; its death can only be postponed. The narrative deliberately exploits other connotations of the verb "to save," which creates meaningful links between particular episodes. Lurie feels personal guilt over what happened to his

<sup>10</sup> Attridge (2000: 100-101) stresses that the protagonist's unfit for the times in which he lives is also ascribable to factors outside South Africa. As a professor of literature, with a passion for Romantic poetry, Lurie has become redundant in the era of "the great rationalization."

daughter, blaming himself for his failure to save her from rape. Michael S. Kochin (2004: 5) comments that Lurie realises “the deepest disgrace” that can be experienced in “the new South Africa”: “the lack of power to protect one’s own.” His subsequent estrangement from Lucy amounts to his loss of the only tangible salvation he can think of. When he initially rejoined her after his retirement, he thought of her as “his second salvation, the bride of his youth reborn” (Coetzee 2000: 86). Lurie’s story, from the attack onwards, is a story of resignation and withdrawal, and a growing recognition that no salvation is available to him, even in the form of the continuation of his biological existence through his progeny. H.P. van Coller likens Lurie’s story to Dante’s peregrinations in the underworld, suggesting that Lurie gradually atones for his sins in a personal purgatory, as a result of which, at the end of the novel, he is “cleansed, having shed all that was important to him before” (Coller 2006: 27). But here the analogy must end – no salvation awaits him, just as the dog cannot be saved. Drawing on the meaning of “grace” as a delay in the payment of a debt or the completion of an execution, Nagy suggests that the protagonist chooses not to prolong the dog’s life because he knows the task cannot be evaded and “grace is not infinite” (2004: 724). Yet in another sense of the word Lurie does grant the dog his grace, thereby acting contrary to the merciless behaviour of the attackers. Locked up in the bathroom during the attack, Lurie observed one of the assailants mortally wounding Lucy’s dog and “not even bother[ing] to administer a *coup de grâce*” (Coetzee 2000: 95). All he can do now for his favourite dog is to lovingly assist in its death. Calina Ciobanu (2012: 683) argues that this is “a de facto act of grace – to an animal that cannot be accommodated in any other way to the world it inhabits.” But the protagonist has come to realise that he shares the dog’s condition of being unfit and redundant. Given the degree of his identification with the unwanted dogs, his final gesture may be read as a vicarious act of giving up on himself, which makes Lurie’s decision “[r]edolent of sacrifice and self-sacrifice” (Cornwell 2003: 63).<sup>11</sup> Lurie effectively opts out of the struggle for life.

In *Disgrace* the protagonist’s sense of an ending is often envisioned as a reversal of the process of evolution. Lurie compares himself to a dog, a dinosaur, speaks of his line running out “like water dribbling into the earth” (Coetzee 2000: 199). These claims are bitter acknowledgements of his doomed existence. In *Life and Times of Michael K* the main character tries to survive through a process of self-diminishment. As his living space and his resources shrink, he limits his needs by becoming a creature lesser than man, distancing himself from “a social human context” (Chesney 2007: 314), and gradually merging with the earth.

<sup>11</sup> Derek Attridge (2000: 114) points out that the protagonist’s sympathy with animals is founded on his relation with animal death rather than animal life.

From a perspective inaccessible to K, his experience as recorded in the novel may be seen as an unconscious retreat from the competition for life, in the hope that finding an uncontested sanctuary will ensure at least individual survival.

Throughout the story K is frequently compared to an animal; he instinctively acts like a threatened creature which can only survive by hiding or appearing harmless. As war rages all around, K and his mother "huddle [...] quiet like mice" in their tiny room below the stairs (Coetzee 2004: 12); on the remote farm he seeks shelter in his hole in the ground by slithering "like a worm" (Coetzee 2004: 107). The officer at the camp aptly remarks on K's metamorphosis: "You are like a stick insect, Michaels, whose sole defence against a universe of predators is its bizarre shape" (Coetzee 2004: 149). K may be said to repeat in reverse mankind's evolutionary history. He moves out of the city to the country, exchanges a proper house for a cave and later a hole dug in the earth. Like primeval men, he acquires food by hunting and primitive farming, also resorting to eating roots and insects, as even growing crops may give away his existence. On the secluded farm he feels like the first man on earth: "The landscape was so empty that it was not hard to believe at times that his was the first foot ever to tread a particular inch of earth or disturb a particular pebble" (Coetzee 2004: 97). He undergoes a transformation into more lowly creatures, even to the point of wishing to merge with inanimate nature: "Let darkness fall soon, let the earth swallow me up and protect me" (Coetzee 2004: 107).<sup>12</sup> As Duncan McColl Chesney claims (2007: 31), K's experience of blending with the elements is not to be mistaken for "some mystical, presocial connection to the earth" or "any equally mystical transcendence." Insofar as K's motivation may be ascertained, he seems to be driven by negation rather than assertion; what looks like an escape into nature is primarily an escape from the civilisation which threatens to destroy him. Anthony Vital notes that despite identifying himself as a gardener, K has little knowledge of plants, and "seems to value gardening not for the opportunity to know other life-forms but for the sense it gives him of living outside civilization's temporal rhythms and patterns of self-assertion" (Vital 2008: 92). Recognising – like Lurie in *Disgrace* – that it is a mistake to own anything, a fatal mistake to be noticeable, K wants to minimise the evidence of his existence. The officer vainly urges K to speak by encouraging him to do the exact opposite: "Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed. [...] You don't want to be simply one of the perished, do you? You want to live, don't you?" (Coetzee 2004: 140).

<sup>12</sup> Don Randall's comment (2007: 214) about the Magistrate's experience in *Waiting for the Barbarians* certainly applies to Michael K as well: "one arrives at animal existence through a process of violent reduction; one is reduced to a life that is no more than bodily life."

K does not answer of course, but it may be argued that his experience is marked by a tension between his consent to be one of the perished and a suppressed wish for success in the struggle for life. In *The Origin of Species* Darwin speaks about the struggle as an attempt not only to preserve individual life, but above all to ensure its continuation: "I should premise that I use the term Struggle for Existence in a large and metaphorical sense, including dependence of one being on another, and including (which is more important) not only the life of the individual, but success in leaving progeny" (Darwin 1859: 62). In line with his increasing self-effacement, K does not intend to have children as he would be unable to keep them alive:

The worst mistake, he told himself, would be to try to found a new house, a rival line, on his small beginnings out at the dam. [...] How fortunate that I have no children, he thought: how fortunate that I have no desire to father. I would not know what to do with a child out here in the heart of the country, who would need milk and clothes and friends and schooling. I would fail in my duties, I would be the worst of fathers. Whereas it is not hard to live a life that consists merely of passing time. (Coetzee 2004: 104)

K's illness at the camp may approximate a slow suicide, as Vital suggests (2008: 98), but it may as well be interpreted as his tacit refusal to adapt. The medical officer speculates: "[...] here I beheld a body that was going to die rather than change its nature. [...] You did not want to die, but you were dying" (Coetzee 2004: 164).

However, despite the adverse natural/political/historical environment, K continues to make an effort to sustain the modicum of life he still has. Identifying himself as a gardener, he does pursue an impulse to create and sustain life, even if this is only life of a vegetable kind: "the impulse to plant had been reawoken in him; now, in a matter of weeks, he found his waking life bound tightly to the patch of earth he had begun to cultivate and the seeds he had planted there" (Coetzee 2004: 59). Although he will not father human children, he regards the pumpkins he has planted as his progeny and devotedly assists in "their struggle upward through the dark earth toward the sun" (Coetzee 2004: 101). Anxious not to be discovered, he decides to keep the number of his vegetable children to the minimum necessary to ensure their survival rather than trying to multiply them. Prevented from cultivating his little garden and thrown back into the midst of the warfare, K carries around his only possession: a packet of seeds. Eventually he loses half of them and realises that there is nowhere to plant the remaining ones. At the end of the novel K, like the protagonist of *Disgrace*, experiences "the feeling that something inside him had let go or was letting go" (Coetzee 2004: 177). K's final dream of scooping water from a shaft by means of a teaspoon may

be evidence of his determination to survive but, given the sheer impossibility of this situation, this image may also be interpreted as an emblem of futility.

If evolutionary success, according to Darwin, means survival and reproduction, then the protagonists of both novels must be seen as losers, unfit to survive in "this place, at this time." Despite his half-conscious but determined effort to ensure at least individual survival by adaptation to his ever-diminishing living space, Michael K is finally left without any resources and faces the prospect of extinction. He is an individual unwittingly caught on "the battlefield of life," powerless against the forces he cannot even comprehend. Regardless of his social isolation and apparent lack of commitment, he is forcibly lumped in with the weaker group and treated accordingly. In *Disgrace*, which is set in a more complex and better specified social context, we see – in the words of Michael S. Kochin (2004: 4) – "the apparent end of all distinctly human possibilities of a life worth living." In biological terms, the erosion of Lurie's erotic impulse converges with his daughter's tragedy of forced reproduction and her humiliating adaptation to the new environment – a process which leads to her father's ultimate alienation. Lurie himself has neither the potential nor the will to adapt. Deidre Coleman (2009: 599) argues that "in Coetzee's fictional world, rapid social change in South Africa entails an intensified struggle for existence for all species." Despite their very significant differences, the stories of both protagonists are overshadowed by the prospect of extinction.<sup>13</sup> In the world of both novels, the ruthless laws of natural selection apply – some will live, and some will inevitably perish. Michael K and Lurie find themselves on the wrong side.

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<sup>13</sup> Phil van Schalkwyk (2006: 11-12) claims that Coetzee, like other white South African writers, has increasingly produced "a literature of dread." H.P. van Coller (2006: 29) classifies *Disgrace* as "apocalyptic" literature.



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